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WHAT ABOUT JESUS?

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Mark 9:2-9

“This is my Son, the Beloved;

listen to him!”

Mark 9:7 (NRSV)

Last January President-elect Barack Obama invited Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback Church in California and best-selling author, to deliver the invocation at his inauguration. The choice annoyed some people, because of Warren’s position on several important and controversial issues. Warren supports laws prohibiting same-sex marriage and is pro-life on the issue of abortion. The choice pleased others,

of course, who admire Warren and agree with him on these issues. Some of us resist that dichotomy: we admire Warren but disagree with some of his positions. The President seems to be in that camp. Members of the clergy guild, beyond our personal politics, were eager to see how Warren would deal with Jesus. If he prayed in Jesus' name, he would offend Jews, Muslims, everybody who was not Christian. If he did not pray in Jesus' name, he would offend his evangelical friends, some of whom believe that God doesn't pay attention to prayers that are not offered in Jesus' name and that not to say it is to miss an opportunity to witness.

Every one of us clergy knows the dilemma and has been caught in it at

one time or another. My favorite—which I've told before—happened long ago when sons of mine were junior high school athletes and I was asked to give the invocation at the junior high athletic banquet. "Banquet" is much too expansive a term: the fare was pizza—stacks and stacks of pizza—and Coke, poured and spilled into paper cups. I recall marveling at the chaotic mess—junior highs attacking the stacks of pizza boxes, spilling Coke all over themselves and the floor—and feeling sorry for the poor janitors. I try to avoid praying at these kinds of events, not because I'm ungrateful or don't believe in prayer, but because I know someone is going to be unhappy with me no matter which way I go on Jesus. But two-time Heisman Trophy winner Archie

Griffin was the speaker, and I did want to meet him. So I agreed to do it. Our town, Bexley, Ohio, an enclave within Columbus, was 35 percent Jewish, so I thanked God for football and pizza and our school and our town and our teachers and coaches and for Ohio State and for Archie, and I prayed “in your holy name.” The junior highs applauded —the first and only time I’ve been applauded for a prayer. Afterward an evangelical buddy of mine, also the father of a junior high football player, reprimanded me for not witnessing to my faith in Jesus Christ by praying in Jesus’ name. I had missed a great opportunity to do some evangelism, he said. He was not persuaded by my attempt to explain that I thought Jesus himself wouldn’t want people to be

offended by the use of his name, particularly his fellow Jews.

So we were all professionally interested in how Rick Warren would handle it. He did it creatively, I thought, by praying "in the name of the one who changed my life." He used the Hebrew word for Jesus, "Yeshua," and "Essa," the Arabic word for Jesus in the Qur'an. He said, "Jesus, who taught us to pray," and then Warren prayed the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus did teach but which does not use his name. "Not bad," I thought. I'll try to remember it if I'm ever invited to pray at a junior high school athletic banquet again, which is not likely.

Martin Marty was also observing, with a scholar's inquisitive eye, Rick Warren's presence and prayer at the inauguration, and he wrote an essay, "Inaugural Jesus," for the biweekly electronic newsletter *Sightings*. Everybody is interested in and has an opinion about Jesus, he observed. Jews remind us that he was born as a Jew, lived as a Jew, and died a Jew. As my friend Rabbi Michael Sternfield tells me, "He's one of ours." Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet: he's in the Qur'an. Hindus like him, too, particularly his nonviolence. And, Marty observes, there is a great "company of nonbelievers, secular humanists, and atheists who admire Jesus. . . . Their patriarch is Thomas Jefferson," who didn't believe Jesus was divine but greatly admired

him and even published the book *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.

In the middle of an ongoing discussion of religion and theology with a young adult granddaughter, having waded through creation and the expanding universe and evolution, religion and science, what seems to be the impulse for religion in every tribe, nation, and individual, and Israel's chosenness and history, she put it with eloquent simplicity: "Well, what about Jesus?"

Well, what about him—Jesus, Jesus the Christ, the one we and millions and millions of people call Lord and Savior?

In his fine book *Jesus the Savior*, William Placher wrote, "Somewhere near the middle of the story, comes a crucial moment. As Jesus teaches and acts in remarkable ways, followers and critics alike begin to ask more pressingly, in effect, 'Who is this guy?'"

This is what we know: He came from Nazareth, a nondescript town in Galilee, in the north of Palestine. He was a builder, a carpenter. At about the age of thirty, he fell under the influence of a compelling prophet by the name of John, was baptized by him, and after an extended period alone in the wilderness, returned to Galilee. He taught in synagogues; he healed the sick; he challenged the conventional rules of his religion but was careful

never to deny his religion. He spoke with authority, people said. Crowds began to gather wherever he went: synagogues, small villages, even the countryside by the Sea of Galilee. He fed people—fed them with food and fed their deepest hungers. He would welcome anybody, it seemed, and his inclusivity irritated and finally enraged religious and political leaders. So they killed him. Three days later he appeared to friends, and the rest is history.

He called men and women to follow him, to welcome and work for the reign of God, which, he said, was already in their midst, only they couldn't always see it. He forged that little band of followers into a community of friends and taught them to love one another

and to hold on to one another, told them they were his people, his “ecclesia,” which we translate “church,” and he told them that the gates of hell, the power of death, would not prevail against them. He told them never to be afraid, because he would be with them forever.

And in the middle of the story, as people, including his own friends, are increasingly asking, “Who is this guy?” two things happen by way of an answer. One day he asks his friends what people are saying about him. They tell him that some think he’s John the Baptist, others Elijah. He puts it to them: “You, who do you say that I am?” Peter, always the first to speak, says, “You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the

Living God.” No one had ever said anything like that before. No one knew what it meant. The words were barely out of Peter’s mouth before he was stumbling all over himself, actually arguing with Jesus when Jesus began to explain that to be a messiah means to suffer and die. “God forbid,” Peter said, demonstrating that he did not understand.

Not long after, Jesus took his three closest friends, Peter again, and James and John, up to a high mountain away from everyone else. Something happened on that mountain that defies description. We call it the transfiguration. Their senses were dazzled. They saw Jesus as they had never seen him before. He was shining,

and Moses and Elijah were there. It's Peter again who is first to speak and says, essentially, "Wow! This is great. Let's mark the spot, build three buildings. Then we won't ever forget what happened here. We could even come back every year and recreate it." Peter is babbling on and on, and Mark, the writer, apologizes for him: "He doesn't know what he's saying." Actually they're terrified. A cloud descends; there is a voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And then it was over, and they stood in the silence of the mountaintop.

Did you ever try to explain a deeply powerful and personal experience? Ever try to describe your experience of beautiful music, sublime art? Ever try to

put into words the passion of your love, the depth of your grief, what it was like to watch the sun appear slowly and rise relentlessly over the lake horizon, or what it was like to feel the warmth of your infant's tiny body in your arms? Some things can't be described. The best we can do with them is be silent and pay attention, savor and enjoy. Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: "There are certain moments in life that cannot be replicated, . . . unprogrammed concurrences of emotional and mental trajectories that, because of their power, change our lives for the better" (*Texts for Preaching*, p. 175). The fancy word for an experience like that is *theophany,* a moment of revelation, an experience of depth and power that doesn't yield to either

analysis or explanation, a moment when you know the mystery of things, see clearly, understand that there is a God who is beyond your ability and comprehension but is somehow present, an experience the German philosopher Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum.*

Whatever happened on that mountaintop, the three closest friends of Jesus understood, for a moment at least, that God was with him, that when Jesus spoke they needed to listen, because it was God speaking, and they needed to watch what he did, watch very carefully from here on, because in him God was acting.

That new insight was huge for them. One of the oldest and most important of their religious traditions was that there shall be no images of God. It's the first commandment in the Law: "No other gods, no idols, no images, statues, or pictures." God simply cannot be reduced to an image or artifact made by human beings.

Several centuries earlier, the great Greek philosopher Aristotle said that God was perfect, and by that, he meant unchanging, unaffected by anything else, indifferent. If God cared about the world, God would be vulnerable to what was going on in the world and human beings. That would make no sense at all. For God to be God meant having nothing

to do with the world. For God to live in the life of a human being was nonsense.

But that idea, that conviction, is precisely what began to happen among the friends of Jesus. They knew better, but what the Gospels report is that people encountered God in this Jesus of Nazareth, and slowly, almost reluctantly, began to entertain the notion that he is Messiah, Christ. Slowly, almost reluctantly, people began to see God in him, to see God in a new way—not as a powerful, avenging judge, but as a father, a parent, who stoops low to love a child. They began to remember those very images in the old literature of their people: God sheltering little ones under wings, God bending low to nurse children, God a wounded lover

pursuing, never giving up on a beloved. Old images, now fresh and new in this one, this Jesus.

Jesus made God personal. W.H. Auden said that when Jesus came "everything became a *You* and nothing was an *It*" (Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, pp. 1, 219). Jesus lived his entire life among people who had every reason to believe they were an *It* and not a *You*. Subject to the whims of the most powerful political and military entity the world had ever seen, pushed around, picked on for amusement by occupying soldiers, executed, crucified for stepping out of line, the bodies of their countrymen left hanging on their crosses as a lesson to others, taxed and betrayed by their own leaders who

understood the fine art of political survival—they were nothing. Nothing until this man from Nazareth told them they were men and women of infinite value and worth because God loved them. They were nothing until they met a man who reached across the terrible barriers of class and religion and uncleanness and touched them, touched their wounds and healed them, opened his arms and invited them to sit at table. They were nothing but pawns in a deadly game of political survival until he told them that God knew their names, knew their hearts, knew where they were even if where they were felt like a far country a long way from home, that God was coming down the road to find them and embrace them and welcome them home.

So beginning with Peter, James, and John standing in stunned silence on the mountaintop, they began to see God in him. And when he spoke, they began to hear the voice of God. “Listen to him,” the voice from the cloud had said.

Listen as he says that whoever receives a little child receives him and the God who is in him.
Listen as he says love your enemy.
Listen as he says love your neighbor.
Listen as he tells a story about a neighbor, wounded, lying by the road, and the Good Samaritan who stops and helps.

Listen as he says forgive those who hurt you, turn the other cheek to those who strike you. Listen as he says if you give your life away for my sake, you will find it.
Listen as he says do not be afraid, for I will be with you always, to the end and beyond.

Bill Placher, in *Jesus the Savior*, wrote:

In the New Testament, Jesus inspires love, hatred, and fear but never boredom. The political and religious authorities conspire to kill him. He challenged some of his contemporaries' most basic

assumptions about God and how to live one's life, and he continues to challenge many of the most pervasive assumptions of our culture. He particularly welcomed the outcasts and oppressed of his society into his company. He calls on those who would follow him to take risks. Many imagine the Bible a conservative book that comforts those who want to preserve the status quo. But the Jesus it presents shook up his society and would shake up ours.

One of the deepest and most profound insights of the theologians down through all the centuries is that though the question of ultimate meaning and purpose, of where we came from and where we are going and why we are here—that is, the question of God—is asked in every human heart, we cannot get an answer by ourselves. Though the very best of us, the brightest and holiest, have pursued God, God remains elusive. The theologians all agree, in spite of disagreeing on many other things, that we can't get to God on our own, can't climb all the way up to God on a ladder of our own constructing. God has to come to us. God has to come down and meet us where we are. And that, Christian faith affirms and we believe—

some of us all the time, all of us some of the time, with doubts and misgivings and uncertainties—that is what we believe happened in Jesus, happens in Jesus.

He is, because God's love was fully in him, our Savior.

Because God's unconditional love is so clear in him, in his acceptance of all people, he saves us from despair, loneliness, isolation, fear.

Because God was in him, the grave was not the end for him, and therefore he saves us from the final foe and the fear of death.

Because God's unconditional forgiveness is in him, he saves us from our sins, the burden of them, the guilt of them, the memory of them.

He is the Savior of all.

But don't you have to do something? How do you get into the orbit of his love? How do you access saving love? Don't you have to sign a statement of faith, join up, come forward at the altar call in order to be saved, in order for him to become your personal savior?

In the Gospel story he comes, he takes the initiative, he stops by the roadside, he comes down the road to welcome the lost child home, he

intercedes for the woman about to be stoned for adultery, he invites the tax collector to come down out of a tree and go to lunch, he welcomes those nobody wants—prostitutes, sinners, unclean—invites them to table and sits down and eats with them.

The miracle of Jesus is that he comes not at our invitation, not because we have earned the right. He comes to us because that is what love does.

Bill Placher said the more you look at Jesus, learn about Jesus, the less inclined you are to put any limits on God's love.

Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance, a consummate scholar, known

and respected in academic circles everywhere, was a Church of Scotland minister. During the war he was a chaplain and after the war, before embarking on his scholarly career, a parish pastor. He told the story of holding the hand of a young nineteen-year-old Scottish soldier as he died. And then later, as a pastor in Aberdeen, holding the hand of the oldest member of his parish as she died. Both, Torrance said, asked him the same question: "Is God really like Jesus?" "Yes," the great scholar said, "to see the Lord Jesus is to see the very face of God" (see Placher, p. 21).

I've been thinking about it all my life, pondering the question put to me, sitting in a rocking chair, by my

granddaughter: “What about Jesus?” I’ve been sitting in churches almost every Sunday all my life, from early childhood, looking up at a stained glass window with a picture of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, to the present, standing here on Sunday morning, beneath a gorgeous stained glass image of Jesus, with outstretched arms. I have not read everything written about him, but I’ve read a lot of it.

In the process, over the years, I’ve learned the beauty and the elegance of attempts to portray him but also their limits and that finally it comes down to a decision, a very personal decision you and I make in our hearts: to listen to him, to follow him, and to thank him for being our Savior. For all of it, my

favorite remains the first hymn I remember singing:

Fairest Lord Jesus,
Ruler of all nature,
O thou of God to earth come down,
Thee will I cherish,
Thee will I honor,
Thou my soul's glory, joy, and crown.